

# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

## *Commander-in-Chief as Pupil and Teacher*

Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809–April 15, 1865) was born in humble circumstances in Kentucky. In his youth, his family relocated first to Indiana and then to Illinois. Although credited with 18 months of formal schooling, Lincoln was largely self-educated, an avid reader, and strong for his 6-foot 4-inch frame. Originally a shopkeeper, he was elected captain of a militia company during the Black Hawk War — which he later claimed gave him more satisfaction than any other “such success in life.” He became an able lawyer, and was a four-term member in the Illinois House of Representatives as well as spending one term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Lincoln married Mary Todd, the daughter of a prominent slave-owning family from Kentucky, on November 4, 1842. The couple had four sons, only one of whom survived to adulthood. Lincoln’s growing concern for the spread of slavery led him to Republican politics by the mid-1850s, and he emerged as the party’s Presidential candidate in 1860, emphasizing free labor and the strength of a unified nation. The South perceived his victory as a threat to its political and economic power and to the institution of slavery. The period between Lincoln’s election and his inauguration witnessed the secession of seven Southern states and the onset of civil war at Fort Sumter in April 1861. Lincoln’s promise “to save the Union” now meant that this Midwestern lawyer-politician with no formal training in the profession of arms would be called upon to serve as Commander-in-Chief during the Nation’s gravest internal crisis. Lincoln’s defining moments would be as a War President.

President Lincoln was a strategic communicator. His Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address stand as two of the greatest orations in the English language. The first contained words of honor and memory; the second proffered reconciliation for both victor and vanquished. Above all, Lincoln led an inspired effort at national unification. He defined the Office of Chief Executive as well as Commander-in-Chief. He abolished slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation, subsequently codified as the Thirteenth Amendment. He signed legislation establishing land-grant public universities. He sustained the victorious war effort, managing military leaders as well as rallying political leaders at all levels. He ensured national elections during wartime, and his performance led to reelection in 1864. His skill averted international conflict with Great Britain and France. As strategic leader, Lincoln embraced technology as an instrument of power and governance—from harnessing steam power for transport and logistics to employing the telegraph for conducting the affairs of state.

In addition to visiting generals and armies in the field and breaking bread with Soldiers in Washington’s forts, Lincoln’s haunts also included Fort McNair’s predecessor—the Washington Arsenal—where Lincoln Hall now stands. Apart from the Arsenal’s later association with the trial and hanging of the conspirators in his assassination in 1865, Lincoln’s fascination with the “tools of war” often brought him to this stockpile of munitions and ordnance.

Lincoln was at his best as pupil and teacher. He read military strategy, theory, and history to educate himself. As a lawyer, he was accustomed to cross-examination, discovery, and acquisition of information—all prerequisites of good leadership. He talked with people, told stories to open avenues to data sharing, and carefully developed a knowledge base before reaching decisions as Chief Executive. The Presidency was a learning experience for Lincoln, and by then translating that education into words, actions, and perceptions, he could train and educate others accordingly. He learned from and taught his war Cabinet, his generals and admirals, the Congress and other officials, and the public.

Abraham Lincoln presided over a people’s conflict, by and for the people, who themselves learned from and taught their Commander-in-Chief in the cauldron of war and reconstruction. Lincoln bequeathed a body of experience in the conduct of public service to his 27 successors, to include his living legacy—the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.